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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 AID-05 TRSE-00 /076 W
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R 170744Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9551
INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
AMEMBASSY DACCA
AMEMBASSY KABUL
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
CINCPAC
AMCONSUL BOMBAY
AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
AMCONSUL MADRAS
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 NEW DELHI 2619

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IN
SUBJECT: STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS: SITUATION REMAINS MURKY

REF: NEW DELHI 2136

SUMMARY: AS THE FINAL WEEK APPROACHES, APATHY AND INDIFFERENCE AMONG PARTY WORKERS AND ELECTORATE APPEAR TO CHARACTERIZE THE CAMPAIGNING FOR THE ELECTIONS TO THE ASSEMBLIES OF ANDHRA PRADESH, ASSAM, KARNATAKA, MAHARASHTRA AND TWO SMALL NORTHEASTERN CONFIDENTIAL

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AREAS. THE THREE MAJOR CONTESTANTS, THE REDDY/CHAVAN CONGRESS (R), MRS. GANDHI'S CONGRESS (I) AND THE JANATA, HAVE SENT THEIR BIG GUNS ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, WITH MIXED RESULTS. CONGRESS (R) LACKS FORCEFUL, NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED LEADERS AND IS ALSO IN THE UNCOMFORTABLE POSITION OF TRYING TO EXPLAIN ITS PAST ASSOCIATION WITH MRS. GANDHI AND THE EMERGENCY. JANATA LEADERS

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HAVE LARGELY STOOD BY THEIR RECORD IN OFFICE, WHILE
MRS. GANDHI ENERGETICALLY BARNSTORMS THE COUNTRY
REPEATING HER FAMILIAR RHETORIC. BY ALL ACCOUNTS, THE
EX-PRIME MINISTER IS DRAWING LARGE CROWDS, BUT THIS
MAY NOT BE AN ACCURATE BAROMETER OF VOTING PATTERS
ON BALLOT DAY. NATIONAL ISSUES APPEAR TO BE HAVING
LIMITED IMPACT. IN THE ABSENCE OF THE "WAVES"
WHICH CHARACTERIZED THE 1972 AND 1977 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS,
LOCAL FACTORS AND PERSONAL AND CASTE CONSIDERATIONS ARE AGAIN
LIKELY TO PLAY A DOMINANT ROLE. THE CAMPAIGN THUS
FAR HAS BEEN MURKY AND CONFUSED, AND THE VOTERS
UNDOUBTEDLY ARE BEWILDERED BY THE PRESENCE IN THE
FIELD OF CANDIDATES FROM ONE JANATA PARTY, TWO CONGRESSES,
VARIOUS MINOR AND SMALL REGIONAL PARTIES AS WELL AS
NUMEROUS INDEPENDENTS. RATHER THAN VENTURING PREDICTIONS
ON THE OUTCOME, MANY OBSERVERS CONCENTRATE THEIR
SPECULATION ON THE POSSIBLE PERMUTATIONS AND ALIGNMENTS
WHICH COULD ARISE AFTER THE VOTES ARE COUNTED. ONE
:CONCLUSION" WHICH SOME HAVE REACHED IS THAT THE RESULTS
MAY BE INCONCLUSIVE. THIS MESSAGE IS BASED ON
CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE THREE CONGENS. END SUMMARY.

1. WITH THE FEBRUARY 25 POLLING DATE JUST OVER A WEEK
AWAY, THE CONGENS REPORT THAT CAMPAIGNING FOR THE
ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN FIVE STATES AND ONE UNION TERRITORY
REMAINS LOW KEY AND LACKLUSTER. APATHY AND INDIFFERENCE
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SEEM TO BE THE MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CAMPAIGN;
UNLIKE THE 1971 AND 1977 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, NO "WAVES"
-- JANATA, INDIRA OR OTHERWISE -- ARE EVIDENT IN THIS
EXERCISE. ONE REASON FOR THE SLOW PACE MAY BE THE ACUTE
LACK OF CAMPAIGN FUNDS WHICH APPARENTLY AFFLICTS ALL
THREE MAJOR PARTIES. THE ONLY EXCEPTION APPEARS TO BE IN
MAHARASHTRA, WHERE THE REDDY/CHAVAN CONGRESS (R) HAS
ORGANIZED A WELL FUNDED AND ORGANIZED EFFORT BASED ON ITS
LONG CONTROL OF THE SUGAR COOPERATIVES. ANOTHER FACTOR
PRODUCING APATHY THUS FAR IS THAT IN SOME STATES VOTERS
ARE FACED WITH LITTLE CHOICE AMONG THE CANDIDATES OF THE
THREE PARTIES: IN ANDHRA PRADESH, FOR EXAMPLE, THEY MUST
DECIDE AMONG THREE TYPES OF CONGRESSMEN: CONGRESS (R),
MRS. GANDHI'S CONGRESS (I), AND JANATA, THE LAST BEING
LARGELY RECENT DEFECTORS FROM THE CONGRESS. THE MULTIPLICITY
OF CANDIDATES IN MOST RACES AND THE LACK OF CLEAR-CUT
"STRAIGHT" CONTESTS HAS ALSO TENDED TO MAKE THE ELECTORATE
BEWILDERED AND INDIFFERENT.

2. DESPITE THE UNUSUALLY LARGE NUMBER OF CANDIDATES IN THE
FIELD FOR MOST OF THE ASSEMBLY SEATS, THERE IS FAR LESS
COMMENT IN THIS INSTANCE THAN IN THE JUNE, 1977 ASSEMBLY

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ELECTIONS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL "SPOILING" ROLE PLAYED BY
INDEPENDENTS. THERE WAS IN GENERAL NO REPETITION OF LAST
YEAR'S "UNSEEMLY" SCRAMBLE FOR JANATA PARTY NOMINATIONS.
THIS IS LARGELY DUE TO JANATA'S GENERALLY LIMITED STRENGTH
AND ORGANIZATION IN THE STATES NOW GOING TO THE POLLS; A
JANATA TICKET IS NO SURE PASSPORT TO VICTORY THIS TIME.
AS A RESULT, WE DETECT FEW INDICATIONS THAT SO-CALLED JANATA
"REBELS" (I.E., THOSE DENIED THE PARTY TICKET) WILL BE
A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN THESE ELECTIONS. ASIDE FROM SMALL AND
DISTANT ARUNACHAL PRADESH AND MEGHALAYA, WHICH DO NOT FOLLOW
THE NATIONAL PATTERN, MOST OF THE CONTESTS WILL BE ESSENTIALLY
THREE-WAY RACES AMONG CANDIDATES OF CONGRESS (R), CONGRESS (I)
AND JANATA. SOME DISSATISFACTION HAS ARISEN IN ANDHRA
AND KARNATAKA OVER THE JANATA'S STRATEGY OF CHOOSING MANY
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RECENTLY-DEFECTED CONGRESSMEN AS ITS CANDIDATES. THIS,
HOWEVER, HAS NOT SERIOUSLY AFFECTED THE JANATA EFFORT THUS
FAR.

3. VOTER APATHY NOTWITHSTANDING, THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP
OF THE THREE MAJOR CONTENDERS HAS BEEN ACTIVE ON THE
HUSTINGS. PRIME MINISTER DESAI, HOME MINISTER CHARAN SINGH,
DEFENSE MINISTER JAGJIVAN RAM, FOREIGN MINISTER
VAJPAYEE AND PARTY PRESIDENT CHANDRA SHEKHAR ARE AMONG
THE JANATA BIG GUNS WHO HAVE RECENTLY BEEN ON ELECTION
TOURS. THE PM'S ACTIVITIES HAVE BEEN NECESSARILY LIMITED
BY HIS OFFICIAL DUTIES (VISITS BY FOREIGN VIPS AND HIS
ATTENDANCE AT THE REGIONAL COMMONWEALTH LEADERS CONFERENCE),
BUT WE UNDERSTAND THAT HE WILL RESUME HIS ELECTION TOURING
IN THE FINAL WEEK. POPULAR RESPONSE TO THIS ELECTIONEERING
HAS VARIED FROM STATE TO STATE. IT IS APPARENT THAT THE
JANATA LEADERSHIP IS MAKING AN ALL-OUT EFFORT IN KARNATAKA
IN THE BELIEF THAT THE PARTY STANDS THE BEST CHANCE IN THAT
STATE. THE PM AND OTHER LEADERS REPORTEDLY DREW GOOD
CROWDS IN KARNATAKA, BUT DID LESS WELL IN ANDHRA.

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----------064756 171146Z /20
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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
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CINCPAC FOR POLAD

4. THE CONGRESS (R) SUFFERS FROM A DEARTH OF CHARISMATIC, NATIONALLY-RECOGNIZED LEADERS. Y.B. CHAVAN AND BRAHMANANDA REDDY HAVE BEEN ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, BUT APPEAR TO BE MAKING LITTLE POPULAR IMPACT OUTSIDE THEIR HOME STATES. THE PARTY SUFFERED A SETBACK IN MAHARASHTRA WHEN ONE OF ITS LOCAL BARONS, FORMER CHIEF MINISTER V.P. NAIK, RECENTLY SUFFERED A HEART ATTACK. STATE-LEVEL CONGRESS (R) LEADERS, SUCH AS THE CHIEF MINISTERS OF ASSAM, MAHARASHTRA AND ANDHRA, ARE LIKELY TO CURTAIL THEIR STATE-WIDE CAMPAIGNING TO FOCUS ON THE RE-ELECTION CONTESTS IN THEIR OWN CONSTITUENCIES.

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5. MRS. GANDHI HAS LOOMED LARGE IN THE CAMPAIGN. IT WOULD NOT BE INCORRECT TO SAY THAT CONGRESS (I) IS INDIRA AND INDIRA IS CONGRESS (I). SHE REMAINS INDIA'S MOST HIGHLY VISIBLE POLITICAL FIGURE AND ONE OF ITS MOST EFFECTIVE SPEECHMAKERS AND CROWD-DRAWERS. HER CHARISMA IS HER PARTY'S GREATEST AND PERHAPS ONLY ASSET. (HER CASH, EXPECTED TO BE ANOTHER ASSET, HAS NOT SURFACED). IN A REPEAT PERFORMANCE OF HER BARNSTORMING ELECTION TOURS AS PM, MRS. GANDHI HAS BEEN ALMOST CONSTANTLY ON THE ROAD SINCE THE CAMPAIGN BEGAN. BY ALL ACCOUNTS, SHE CONSISTENTLY DRAWS LARGE CROWDS AT HER MEETINGS -- LARGER THAN THOSE ATTRACTED BY EITHER CONGRESS (R) OR JANATA LEADERS. HER CAMPAIGN RHETORIC FOLLOWS PREDICTABLE LINES, AND NEWS ACCOUNTS

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OF HER SPEECHES IN THE "NATIONAL HERALD" (NOW CONTROLLED
BY HER CONGRESS PARTY) SOUND LIKE AN ALL-TOO FAMILIAR
PHONOGRAPH RECORD. STANDARD THEMES IN HER REPERTOIRE INCLUDE
APPEALS TO THE "WEAKER SECTIONS", HARIJANS AND MINORITIES,
ATTACKS ON THE JANATA FOR IGNORING THE POOR AND OPPRESSED,
AND CHARGES THAT THE DESAI GOVERNMENT IS BENDING TO THE
DICTATES OF WESTERN COUNTRIES. BUT HER MAJOR ATTACK IS
OFTEN RESERVED FOR THE REDDY/CHAVAN CONGRESS (R) WHICH SHE
MAY REGARD AS HER PRIME OPPONENT. IN A SORT OF
REPLY OF HER 1969 RHETORIC AFTER THE FIRST CONGRESS SPLIT,
SHE ACCUSES THE "OTHER" CONGRESS OF COLLUDING WITH THE
JANATA. MRS. GANDHI ALSO CONTINUES TO DEFY THE SHAH
COMMISSION OF INQUIRY; ON FEBRUARY 15, SHE ONCE AGAIN REFUSED
TO APPEAR BEFORE THE COMMISSION. (MRS. GANDHI'S APPEARANCE
BEFORE A DELHI MAGISTRATE FOR EARLIER DEFIANCE OF THE
COMMISSION HAS BEEN RESCHEDULED TO FEBRUARY 27.)

6. CAMPAIGN SPEECHES BY THE LEADERS OF THE OTHER TWO
MAJOR CONTENDING PARTIES FOLLOW PREDICTABLE THEMES. JANATA
LEADERS CITE THE NATIONAL JANATA GOVERNMENT'S ACHIEVEMENTS
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IN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICIES AND URGE VOTERS TO
COMPLETE THE REVOLUTION OF 1977 BY ELECTING JANATA GOVERNMENTS
IN THE STATES NOW GOING TO THE POLLS. SEEMINGLY CAUGHT IN THE
MIDDLE, THE CONGRESS (R) FINDS ITSELF IN THE UNCOMFORTABLE
POSITION OF ATTACKING THE JANATA AND THE CONGRESS (I)
ALONG DIFFERENT LINES AND WITH DIFFERENT SETS OF ARGUMENTS.
CHAVAN, REDDY AND THE OTHERS ARE STRAINING TO DISASSOCIATE
THEMSELVES FROM MRS. GANDHI AND THE EMERGENCY, BUT
THEIR BELATED REPENTANCE SOMEHOW LACKS CREDIBILITY AND HAS
IN FACT BECOME THE OBJECT OF MRS. GANDHI'S DERISION.
THEY ATTACK JANATA'S RECORD IN MANY KEY AREAS,BUT THEIR
OFFENSIVE APPEARS LESS VIGOROUS THAN MRS. GANDHI'S. FOR
THE MOST PART, CONGRESS (R) LEADERS HAVE FALLEN BACK TO THE
THEME OF CITING THE ACHIEVEMENTS MADE UNDER CONGRESS REGIMES
IN THE INDIVIDUAL STATES.

7. THE OVERALL PICTURE WHICH EMERGES AT THIS STAGE OF THE
CAMPAIGN IS A MURKY, CONFUSED ONE. NATIONAL ISSUES APPEAR
TO HAVE LITTLE IMPACT AND THE BURING ISSUES OF 1977
ARE NOWHERE EVIDENT. IN THE ABSENCE OF THE "WAVES" WHICH
PREVAILED IN THE 1972 AND 1977 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, LOCAL
FACTORS SUCH AS CASTE AND COMMUNITY AFFILIATIONS, PERSONALITIES
OF INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES AND VERY LOCALIZED ISSUES ARE AGAIN
LIKELY TO PLAY A DOMINANT ROLE ON BALLOT DAY. MRS. GANDHI'S
PERSONAL APPEAL IS A MAJOR IMPONDERABLE, SINCE THE SIZE
OF CROWDS AT ELECTION RALLIES IS NOT AN ACCURATE BAROMETER
OF POTENTIAL VOTING PATTERS. THE CRYSTAL BALLS OF POLITICAL
PUNDITS ARE FURTHER CLOUDED BY THE PRESENCE OF THREE MAJOR

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NATIONAL PARTIES IN CERTAIN AREAS (E.G., PEASANTS AND WORKERS
PARTY IN MAHARASHTRA AND CPM IN ASSAM), AND THE MULTIPLICITY
OF INDEPENDENTS IN MANY RACES. THE ONE "CONCLUSION" THAT
SOME HAVE REACHED IS THAT THE RESULTS MAY WELL BE INCONCLUSIVE.
RATHER THAN VENTURE A GUESS, MANY OF DELHI'S LONG-TIME OBSERVERS
HAVE PREFERRED TO CONCENTRATE THEIR SPECULATION ON THE
POSSIBLE PERMUTATIONS AND REALIGNMENTS WHICH
COULD ARISE AFTER THE RESULTS ARE IN. IN DOING SO, ALONG THE
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LINES WE SKETCHED OUT IN REFTEL LAST WEEK, THESE COMMENTATORS
GENEALLY RECOGNIZE THAT THESE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS COULD WELL
DETERMINE THE PATTERNS OF THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL EVOLUTION
FOR THE NEXT FEW YEARS AND AS SUCH MAY BE TERMED A "WATERSHED"
EVENT.
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